DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 372 408 CS 214 436

AUTHOR Hall, Dennis
TITLE The Indeterminacy of the Question and Answer Format.
PUB DATE Mar 94
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (45th, Nashville, TN, March 16-19, 1994).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Learning Strategies; *Questioning Techniques; *Rhetoric; Text Structure
IDENTIFIERS Indeterminacy; Information Format; Postmodernism; Question Answering; *Rhetorical Strategies

ABSTRACT

Reader, writers, and teachers of expository prose should pay closer attention to the question and answer (Q&A) format's theoretical and practical implications. The Q&A format contributes to the seemingly endless succession of questions and answers and is part of that flight from one signifier to another characteristic of postmodern culture. The Q&A format is increasingly chosen for the delivery of complex information or for the delivery of information into an environment of conflict, even more often if both intricacy and controversy are present. On the local level, the Q&A format obfuscates what was once called "content" or "information" or "exposition" by sporting with the desires of readers and diverting them with the pleasures of the rhetorical model. More often than not, the Q&A format contributes to indeterminacy in those circumstances in which readers and sometimes writers are seeking determinacy. The format is a currently popular and effective rhetorical strategy in large measure because it speaks to a deeply felt need for answers, a search for the experience of security and authenticity and authority in a shifting world--because it is both a response to and an instance of the superficiality, ephemerality, fetishism, commodification of images, and time-space compression that mark the postmodern condition. (Contains 10 notes.) (RS)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 372 408

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D. Hall

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC).

Dennis Hall © March, 1994
Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY 40292
(502) 852-6896
DRHall@ULKYVM.Louisville.Edu

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

The Indeterminacy of the Question and Answer Format

Not since the heyday of the Platonic dialogue in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has the habit of conspicuously shaping discourse in a series of exchanges between interlocutors been so common. The question and answer format, of course, is everywhere to be seen and heard in contemporary American culture, as it supplies the basic structure to the host of interview and talk shows, news and information programs, and what are known as info-mercials that fill the expanding chunks of time and space created through the explosion of radio, television, and cable communications.[1] People in the global village seem bent on conversation rather than declamation. In the mediation of writing, something closer to the spirit of the Platonic dialogue survives in periodicals as diverse as *Playboy*, *Lears' Magazine*, *The American Poetry Review*, *Spin*, and *Writing on the Edge* that routinely print interviews. Although perhaps less conspicuous, a related phenomenon is the increased use of the question and answer format in the writing of utilitarian, expository prose; that is, writing whose primary purposes are other than the pursuit of theory or aesthetic response. This rhetorical gambit in the work-a-day world of writing has quietly achieved the status of a prose model, one so common that it goes nearly

CS214436

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

unnoticed by its producers as well as its consumers.[2]

As Plato demonstrated, the appearance of dialogue lends itself to persuasion, so not surprisingly the question and answer format has become a staple of commercial and bureaucratic discourse. One now finds it perhaps most commonly in sales documents, hawking everything from insurance plans to memberships in health clubs to storm windows to dietary supplements. But the question and answer format is also common in corporate reports, in documents purporting to explain employee benefits, in journalistic accounts of the proposals of politicians and developers, of new laws, and of the best ways to celebrate Christmas or the Fourth of July, in pamphlets explaining the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses and Roman Catholics, in the Surgeon General's pamphlet on AIDS, in directions for hooking up and programming the VCR or for doing the income tax. Q&A is a staple in writing on a wide variety of subjects from the most mundane to the most profound.

We have all seen and read these pieces of prose. The questions and the answers are commonly marked with a capitol "Q" and "A" or otherwise made typographically distinct. And in contrast to the social facts of human conversation, answers are invariably longer than the questions, which are routinely very short. And answers are more or less uniform in length throughout the piece. Writing on this model most often stands alone, but is not uncommonly incorporated as part of larger documents made of

more or less straight-up exposition, rendered in a relatively unbroken string of declarative sentences.[3] Both in the visual processing of the typography and in the shifting between interrogation to declaration in the process of reading, emphasis in the question and answer format invariably falls to a significant degree upon the representation of an exchange.

The questions present themselves as those the reader has or is likely to have in mind when confronting the piece's object of attention, and, consequently, they quietly presume to represent the reader's curiosity or need to know and so to characterize the supplicant reader in the unfolding rhetorical drama the text seeks to create. Unlike those in life as it is lived, these questions are never open-ended and seldom ambiguous. And while these questions may address matters of serious consequence or of emotional difficulty, as a rule they are as intellectually uncomplicated, as conceptually simple, as the context allows, whether the question deals with choosing underwear to go with see-through fashions or treatment options for breast cancer.

The answers, for their part, present themselves as the voice of authority, an agency wise enough to anticipate questions of interest to the reader and sufficiently knowledgeable to satisfy the reader's curiosity or need know. They manifest the power that compliments the character of the reader in this rhetorical drama. The source of the answers is seldom personalized or even identified, remaining either anonymous or

obscure, so creating a sense of omniscience that lends to the exchange a feeling of authenticity. While one can locate exceptions, as a rule the answers are simple, direct, unambiguous. The questions have, if you will, the "feel" of "right answers;" they exhibit confidence and seek to inspire it.

What we have in the question and answer format, then, is a model for the arrangement of prose that seeks either to make information accessible or amusing or to deliver successfully a controversial content by mimicking spoken dialogue in the print of expository prose. What is obvious in analysis in this situation is less so in the ordinary experience of reading; here the questions and answers are written by the same person or persons, who compose the questions with the answers already in mind. There is no genuine interrogation and response; the question and answer format is a manifestation of the monologic speech of authority dressed up (or is it down?) in the trappings of dialogic speech. The Q&A format, to use Bakhtinian terms, seeks to thwart "each person's essential 'answerability' in any communications situation"(Clark 9).[4]

The Q&A format is increasingly chosen for the delivery of complex information or for the delivery of information into an environment of conflict, even more often if both intricacy and controversy are present. For those outside the beltway, for example, a Q&A piece on President Clinton's health care proposal may be the most efficient way to approach an issue of baroque

complexity, whether one is for it or opposed to it. And consider for a moment who actually reads a corporation's annual report--I mean the prose. Nine out of ten of us burden the landfill with this stuff, but that one in ten who reads it doesn't like the look of the balance sheets or is otherwise unhappy with management. From management's point of view, this person is the typical reader, one who is in desperate need of the ministrations of a question and answer account of the condition of the company.

The Q&A format, again as Plato recognized, is a means of overcoming reader resistance--resistance of two kinds: either to the process of reading itself or to the message. The Q&A piece on installing fiberglass insulation or on the chardonnays of Sonoma county seeks to overcome a resistance to reading, while the Q&A article on energy policy or the danger signs of alcoholism seeks to reduce a resistance to content.

In terms of their play on resistance, question and answer pieces, as a rule, fall into three categories: First, anyone who has enjoyed the simple--I should say innocent rather than naive--pleasures of Dear Abby or Miss Manners or a Q&A article on buying a used car or yard sailing or gardening or TV trivia or health or sexuality[5] knows the power of this writing model to tickle one's fancy, to amuse. In situations such as these, the question and answer format contributes to diversion, provides what legitimately may be called pleasures of the text. Second, anyone who has experienced the rush of opening the package that contains

a mailorder computer knows the powerful desire to resist the directive, "read me first," and to submit to its authority, despite the validation of that authority by common sense and an investment of over $2,000. In situations such as these, the question and answer format can contribute to making complex and crucial information accessible. Third, anyone who has been a party to a labor dispute knows the power of articles with titles like "Questions and Answers about the Conflict at State University." In situations such as these, the question and answer format contributes to shaping the terms of the dispute and to providing textual warrants in appeals for support. If the voices of others are not heard, however, there is no dialogue; questions and answers written in one voice are declarations, dialogic appearances notwithstanding. And since dialogue does not actually take place apart from a presumption of equality among the voices engaged, these questions and answers commonly represent a power play, as they seek at once to claim and to demonstrate superior authority in a combination of voice and question begging.

That questions and answers are so common and so successful in these three ways perhaps says as much about readers as it does about writers, about culture as rhetoric. The explosion in their use in the last decade may be usefully seen as a manifestation of the condition of postmodernity and evinces the now widely held view of the power of language to construct reality, specifically through the force of dialogue.[6] The question and answer format

contributes to this linguistic construction of reality by modelling the reality within the text of the relationship between question and answer, between, if you will, the characters of the Questioner and the Answerer.

The Q&A format exploits what Umberto Eco calls the "theme of hyperrealistic reproduction"(49) so much in evidence in American popular culture. While a prose model is not as elaborate an encoding as, for example, Disneyland, the Q&A format shares to a remarkable degree in the practice of producing and consuming facsimiles that contribute to undermining "the logical distinction between Real World and Possible Worlds," as Eco puts it (15). What the Q&A format represents and how this prose model represents focuses on the feeling of authenticity. The hyperreal is not a matter of constructing and consuming a facsimile because one can't have the genuine; rather, it is a matter of providing and embracing an alternative reality that seeks to eliminate any need or desire for the original (see Eco 19). Q&A is not so much an imitation of the dialogic as a substitute for it. Disneyland, for example, demonstrates that, as Eco puts it, "technology can give us more reality than nature can"(44).[7] The question and answer format, after its fashion, writes the story of Questioner and Answerer in much the same way Disneyland writes the story of Main Street or Tomorrow Land or proposes to write American history in northern Virginia. As Questioner and Answerer use language to construct a relationship on the ubiquitous model of

human conversation; they mutually extend their identities in a manifestation of (rather than imitation of) talk. In Jean Baudrillard's terms, what we have here is an instance of the third order of order of simulation, "the dominant scheme of the present phase of history governed by the code" (Structural Law of Value 61).[8] In this era, Baudrillard argues, **communication**--an economy of signs--is the source of value rather than **use** or **exchange**, which disappear in favor of a simulations based, not upon counterfeits of specific realities, but upon models ". . . from which all forms proceed according to the modulation of differences. Only an affiliation to the model generates meaning and makes sense (*fait sens*). Nothing functions according to an end, but proceeds from the model, the 'signifier of reference,' which acts like an anterior finality, supplying the only credible outcome (*la seule vraisemblance*). This is simulation in the modern sense of the term. . . "(64).

Moreover, the alternative reality generated in the Q&A simulation of human conversation is not in doubt, nor in many--perhaps most--cases are the satisfactions of this relationship. A rhetorical technology will produce a reality a whole lot neater, clearer, more precise, and emphatic than will fully contextualized human exchanges "exposed to the judgement and responses of others who hold the maker of the statement responsible for it" (Clark 9). Few people feel a need or desire for the energy and messiness of the dialogic in the

technicalities and simple amusements of life and often seek to avoid them in matters of controversy. While it is tempting to view the alternative created by the question and answer format as ersatz, as somehow "unreal," such a view would, I think, be an error. One may not like the alternative reality, but that is beside the point. One may resent the facisimilie's presence, but to confront the source of one's annoyance with yet another linguistically constructed, alternative "reality," is efficiently to confirm the reality of that facisimilie.[9] That reality is also confirmed in the dialogue between reader and text, an experience which rather neatly mirrors the dialogue between the Questioner and Answerer. Both what the Q&A format represents and how it represents contribute to its sense of reality, its feeling of authenticity.

The question and answer model is, then, an especially efficient contributor to the multiplication of realities and the attendant sense of fragmentation that are commonly cited as characteristic of late capitalism and postmodern culture. The Q&A model, if you will, is a rhetorical technology especially adept at meeting the needs of a consumer culture that trafficks in commodified signs. We increasingly tend to produce and consume commodities--including written texts--not so much for their use value as for their power to signify. Consumption, in this view, is a metonymic discourse that pervades the economic, political, social, and cultural fabric; signs principally refer to other

signs. The question and answer format contributes to, using Baudrillard's term, the "profusion" that at once reflects and sustains postmodern culture. The pursuit of desire results in the consumption of an interminable succession of signal commodities; we embrace signs, deplete them of their reference to other signs, only to move on to other signs. "The flight from one signifier to another," Baudrillard suggests, "is no more than the surface reality of a desire, which is insatiable because it is founded on a lack. And this desire, which can never be satisfied, signifies itself locally in a successions of objects and needs" (Selected Writings 45).

The question and answer model for the development of expository prose is only one of many such models that invest, as Baudrillard puts it, "the most banal aspects of ordinary life" (Structural Law of Value 67).[10] But as readers and writers and teachers of same, we would perhaps do well to pay closer attention to Q&A's theoretical and practical implications. While I would not wish to argue that many of the features of the condition of postmodernity are as pervasive, unavoidable, or dismal as Jean Baudrillard suggests, his views remain useful to our paying closer attention to the question and answer format and a good many other practice in expository writing. "We live," he suggests with his usual provocation, "in the mode of *referendum*, and that is precisely because there are no more referentials. All signs and messages. . . .present themselves to us in the

question/answer format. The social system of communication has evolved from a complex syntactic structure of language to the probing of a binary signalling system: a perpetual test. Yet, as we know, tests and referenda are perfect forms of simulation. The reply is induced by the question; it is, so to speak, design-ated in advance. Hence the referendum is really just an ultimatum. The question being unilateral, is therefore no longer properly interrogative, but rather the immediate imposition of a meaning whose cycle is instantly completed. Each message is a verdict, like the statistical ones announced in polls. The simulation of distance (that is, of contradiction) between the two poles of the communication process is, like the reality effect of the sign, just a tactical hallucination. . . .'[*sic*] 'Reality' has been analyzed into simple elements and recomposed into scenarios of regulated opposition. . . .[this ellipsis in text]" (Structural law of Value 68).

Baudrillard, after his fashion, is right on the mark. On the global level, the Q&A format contributes to the seemingly endless succession of questions and answers and is part of that flight from one signifier to another characteristic of postmodern culture. On the local level, the Q&A format commonly obfuscates what we once called "content" or "information" or "exposition" by sporting with the desires of readers and diverting them with the pleasures of the rhetorical model. Perhaps more important on this practical level is what Q&A commonly is not; claims to the

contrary notwithstanding, the Q&A format more often than not contributes to indeterminacy in precisely those circumstances in which readers and sometimes writers are seeking determinacy. The Q&A format is a currently popular and effective rhetorical strategy in large measure because it speaks to a deeply felt need for answers, a search for the experience of security and authenticity and authority in a shifting world--because it is both a response to and an instance of the superficiality, ephemerality, fetishism commodification of images, and time space-compression that mark the postmodern condition (Harvey 292, *passim*).

Notes

1. Networked computer communications has embrace the question and answer format as an orientation tool and created the term "qfa" for "questions frequently asked."

2. Interestingly, not one of the currently common business or technical writing texts suggests the use of the question and answer format as an organizational strategy, despite the wide use of the practice in commercial and administrative discourse. I am not aware of how journalism texts treat the question and answer format.

3. The increase in the appearance of inventive and rhetorical questions in texts in the last decade is a related stylistic phenomenon, but the question and answer format is a feature of global arrangement rather than syntactic style.

4. As Gregory Clark succinctly summarizes Bakhtin's view: "because the discourse of one must always interact with the discourse of others, any statement must function within the immediate context of a dialogue, where it is exposed to the judgment and response of others who hold the maker of the statement responsible for it. Such answerability, for Bakhtin, is

a primary fact of our existence: 'Life is dialogical by its very nature. To live means to engage in dialogues, to question, to listen, to answer, to agree, etc. (Todorov 97)" (9).

5. Many, but by no means all, of these newspaper and magazine "features" in the question and answer format are set up as responses to reader's questions. I do not seriously doubt the claims that the questions are sent in by real human beings, but this fact does not create a genuinely interrogative situation. The writer chooses which questions to respond to, has hundred even thousands of questions to choose from, and is often free to edit the questions--a situation tantamount to writing one's own questions.

6. To rehearse the fashionable critical theory suggested here would be an imposition, and to list the texts rehearsing the theories of Thomas Kuhn, Richard Rorty, Clifford Geertz, and, above all, Mikhail Bakhtin would likewise impose. For a trenchant and practical account, I recommend and am indebted to Gregory Clark's, *Dialogue, Dialectic, And Conversation*.

7. This is the golden world that the poet creates, the one that nature will not be at pains to provide, as Sir. Phillip Sydney explains *An Apology for Poetry* (Norton I, 492-93).

8. Baudrillard offers the following summary:

> Three orders of simulation, parallel to mutations in the law of value, have succeeded one another since the Renaissance.
>
> The *counterfeit* is the dominant scheme of the "classical" epoch, from the Renaissance to the industrial revolution.
>
> *Production* is the dominant scheme of the industrial era.
>
> *Simulation* is the dominant scheme of the present phase of history, governed by the code.
>
> Simulacra of the first order play on the natural law of value, those of the second order play on the commodity law of value, and those of the third order play on the structural law of value. (Structural Law of Value 61)

9. All that glisters, glisters; the question of what constitutes gold, an element of value, depends upon a discourse community or, more plainly, a market.

10. Baudrillard observes that "the most banal aspects of ordinary life are invested with these models. Digitality is among us; it preys on the messages and signs of modern societies. Its most

concrete form is the test: question/answer, stimulus/response. Content is steadily neutralized in the in the continual procedure of controlled interrogation, of verdict and ultimatums to be decoded. . .The cycle of meaning is infinitesimally abridged into minute quantities of energy/information, bits, questions/answers, returning to their points of departure, describing only there perpetual reactualization of the same models... It dwells everywhere that supply engulfs demand, or the question devours the answer, or absorbs and regurgitates it in decodeable form, or simply invents and then anticipates it" (Structural Law of Value 67).

Works Cited

Baudrillard, Jean. "The Structural Law of Value and the Order of Simulacra," in *The Structural Allegory: Reconstructive Encounters with the New French Thought*. Ed John Fekete. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minneapolis P, 1984.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Mark Poster. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1988.

Clark, Gregory. *Dialogue, Dialectic, and Conversation: A Social Perspective on the Function of Writing*. Carbondale, IL: CCCC/Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

Eco, Umberto. *Travels in Hyperreality: Essays*, trans. William Weaver. New York: HBJ, 1986.

Harvery, David. *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1990.

Prepared for the Conference on College Composition and Composition meeting (K-22), Nashville, 19 March 1994.
{WordPerfect 5.1; Word count: 3557 File size:269/2}
Copyright © Dennis R. Hall March 1994